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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000587

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SUBJECT: PEDERSEN BRIEFS ON UNSYG BAN'S TRIP TO DAMASCUS

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a 4/25 meeting with the Ambassador, UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen said that, in terms of the Lebanon agenda, the Syrians -- as could have been predicted, he acknowledged -- offered "nothing" in UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon's meetings in Damascus the previous day. While adopting a friendly and welcoming posture, the Syrians repeated familiar arguments regarding the tribunal (that it is a Lebanese matter of no concern to Syria), diplomatic relations (fine in theory but dependent on a new Lebanese cabinet), UNSYG 1701 and arms smuggling (the SARG is not really the problem), Sheba' Farms (linked to an Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights), and so on. The only slight positive note, Pedersen said, emphasizing the word "slight," might be on border demarcation, with the Syrians agreeing at least in theory to reactivate the bilateral border commission without the change in the Lebanese cabinet they required for everything else. In addition, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad claimed that Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal would send an envoy to Damascus soon. Pedersen noted that Syrian Foreign Minister Mu'allim criticized Ambassador Feltman by name to Ban.

12. (S) Asking that this information not be shared, Pedersen (please protect) said that he found Ban himself to be an "enigma" and not particularly impressive in his meetings. Pedersen wondered whether Syrian hints that the UN and the UNSC would be to blame for instability in Lebanon might have had an impact on the SYG. Asked by the Ambassador why Ban had given such a gushingly positive press statement that seemed to invite Syrian intervention in Lebanon, Pedersen did not answer directly, saying that Ban's statement had succeeded in annoying the Syrians, who were unhappy with his references to the tribunal. Pedersen noted that UN political advisor Michael Williams should be able to provide a more accurate briefing of Ban's meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, as Williams served as Ban's notetaker while both Pedersen and UNSC 1559 envoy Terje Roed-Larsen were left out. End summary.

PEDERSEN BRIEFS ON DAMASCUS MEETINGS
(WHILE NOTING HE WAS NOT IN ASAD SESSION)

13. (C) UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen briefed the Ambassador on 4/25 on UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon's meetings with SARG officials the previous day. Pedersen noted that he and UNSCR 1559 envoy Terje Roed-Larsen had

participated in Ban's two-hour discussion with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim on a plane from Doha to Damascus, in the meeting with Syrian Vice President Farouk al-Shara, and in the subsequent wrap-up lunch in Damascus with Mu'allim. Larsen and Pedersen had not participated in the restricted meeting between Ban and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, although Michael Williams ("who should be able to give your people in New York a full read-out") had served as Ban's notetaker. Pedersen said that Williams had read his notes of the meeting to Pedersen and Larsen afterwards, and Ban had met with his staff together before departing. Pedersen noted that, despite the previous Syrian attempts to block his arrival, Larsen had been received appropriately, although the Syrians teased him with some bitterness about his "friends" (meaning the U.S. and France).

SYRIANS OFFER 'NOTHING'; REPEAT
PREDICTABLE AND FAMILIAR ARGUMENTS

14. (C) Putting information from all the meetings together, Pedersen said that the Syrians had offered "nothing" to the UNSYG regarding Lebanon. (Pedersen and the Ambassador only discussed Lebanon-related issues.) The Ambassador asked Pedersen whether he was surprised, and Pedersen acknowledged that the outcome was "sadly predictable." While the discussion on the plane ride with Mu'allim was at times "difficult" and the meeting with Shara "worthless," the Syrians tried to project a welcoming and friendly posture to the UNSYG, Pedersen said, noting with regular frequency how this would only be the first of many such visits. But their positions on the various Lebanon-related topics were repetitions of previous Syrian statements:

-- Special Tribunal for Lebanon: This is an issue that does
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not concern the Syrians, and the tribunal's establishment depends on a Lebanese consensus.

-- UNSCR 1701 and arms smuggling to Lebanon: Smuggling takes place in both directions and is impossible to control because of the physical nature of the border. The SARG is not involved and is the victim of such smuggling. Moreover, while the SARG is supportive of UNSCR 1701, no country has come forth with technical assistance to help the Syrians on their side of the border. Pedersen said that Mu'allim repeated the Syrian line that an international presence on the Lebanese side of the border would be seen as a hostile act, but Pedersen did not believe that Asad had said that.

-- Normal diplomatic relations with Lebanon: These can only be established when Lebanon has a credible, friendly, constitutionally-valid national unity cabinet that is not hostile to Syria.

-- Sheba' Farms: They are Lebanese, but the exact boundaries of Sheba' Farms can only be determined once Israel has withdrawn from the Golan Heights. Pedersen noted that Sheba' was "not a big issue of discussion" in the meetings.

-- Lebanon's presidency: While this issue came up only in passing, the Syrians noted the need for a Lebanese consensus.

15. (C) Pedersen said that the only "slight" positive development "might" relate to border demarcation (with Pedersen emphasizing the words "slight" and "might" to indicate his own skepticism). The Syrians agreed that border demarcation -- but "of course" starting in the north -- was a good thing for both countries. They claimed to agree to reactivate the bilateral border commission even in advance of the formation of a national unity cabinet. This was the only issue, Pedersen noted, on which the Syrians did not insist that a replacement for the Siniora cabinet was an essential step.

SAUDI ENVOY TO DAMASCUS?

¶6. (C) Asad also told Ban that Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal had called recently to discuss a variety of issues, including UNSCR 1701 and the tribunal. Prince Saud had agreed to send a special envoy to Syria, whom Asad expected soon. The Syrians projected a view that the Saudi connection was "extremely significant."

¶7. (C) Pedersen expressed surprise that, at one point, Mu'allim told Ban that one way to make progress on the Lebanon issues would be for "Mr. Pedersen's friend Ambassador Feltman to take a long vacation." Mu'allim claimed that House Speaker Pelosi's visit to Beirut and Damascus had been successful in large part because Ambassador Feltman had "left for Cyprus" to avoid being associated with the visit of a delegation going to Damascus. Ambassador Feltman should leave again, for a long time. Ban was perplexed by the comments and turned to Pedersen for an explanation of who this person was, and Pedersen said that he corrected Mu'allim by noting that the Ambassador had been on R&R in the United States, not Cyprus, when Speaker Pelosi was in town. Pedersen commented that, based on some comments the Syrians made over lunch, Mu'allim and Hizballah officials seem to share the conviction that the Ambassador "scripts" March 14 leaders Walid Jumblatt and Samir Geagea. The Ambassador asked whether Pedersen detected a security threat in such comments, and Pedersen said that he did not believe so but found it curious that the Syrians placed that much importance on his role.

QUESTIONING BAN'S PRESS CONFERENCE

¶8. (C) The Ambassador noted that, for a visit that one could have easily predicted would achieve nothing, the media coverage had been largely positive, in Syria's favor. The Ambassador attributed this to Ban's press conference in Damascus, where Ban seemed to be inexplicably following a script that would flatter the hosts who had just left him empty-handed. Ban's comments on some topics even seemed to invite Syrian intervention in Lebanese affairs. The press conference handed the Syrians and their Lebanese allies a tangible victory, the Ambassador argued. Pedersen did not answer directly. He said that the Syrians did not seem to share that assessment, as Mu'allim complained afterwards about Ban's comments on the tribunal. The Syrians had not

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wanted Ban to mention anything about the tribunal to the press, and they were particularly annoyed that he had, near the end of his press conference, hinted at possible UNSC action to create the tribunal.

BAN DESCRIBED AS 'ENIGMA'

¶9. (S) Pedersen (please protect), asked by the Ambassador what the SYG concluded from his trip, described Ban as an "enigma." Pedersen said that he left Damascus "without a clue" as to Ban's thinking on Syria and Lebanon. Asking that this not be reported, Pedersen said that he also found Ban "unimpressive" in his meetings with the Syrians. Maybe it was due to a language problem or maybe just a stylistic question, Pedersen said, but Ban did not push the Syrians or even respond fully to what the Syrians said. "Did he understand all of the issues?" he mused. For example, Pedersen said that the Syrians hinted repeatedly that, if there is instability in Lebanon, the UN and UNSC will be responsible. "Did the Secretary-General understand that was a threat?" Pedersen said. And, if so, he wondered, did the SYG take offense, "as he should," and think about "what the Syrians are really up to"? Or, instead, was the SYG so worried by the Syrian comments that he will become more cautious on questions regarding Lebanon. It was impossible

to tell what Ban was thinking, Pedersen said.

COMMENT

¶10. (S) We know that Pedersen -- a consistent advocate of "talking to everyone," no matter how odious the interlocutor or how futile the meeting inevitably will be -- was one of the advocates of Ban's travel to Syria. But even Pedersen seemed uncomfortable with the absence of any kind of positive response from the Syrians. He appeared disgusted with the Syrian performance, especially the veiled threats against Lebanon's stability. We hope that Ban's apparently "enigmatic" nature does not blind him to the fact that, judging by Pedersen's read-out, the SYG was apparently stiffed on all fronts (and we wonder if Ban will question why some of his advisors were so insistent that he travel there).

We defer to Embassy Damascus as to how the visit played in Syria, but in Lebanon the pro-Syrian media is having a field day. Whatever the implications are for and in Syria, the SYG's trip to Damascus, and especially what are being played as fawning comments by Ban about Syria, deeply dismayed our friends in Lebanon. This was all very predictable. Perhaps this is all temporary, though: we hope that Ban's briefing to the UNSC can help shift the image of the visit.

FELTMAN